

When I first started as a summer intern at the InterReligious Task Force on Central America (IRTF), I paid attention to only the last five words of its name: Task Force on Central America. I didn't understand what "InterReligious" really meant, and I was most excited about working on issues I had learned about in my Spanish, Environmental Studies, and Economics classes around human rights and environmental issues in Central America. I came across the organization when looking for ways to get involved in fair trade initiatives in Cleveland, and it felt like I hit the jackpot when IRTF appeared in my search, an organization with decades of action toward the goals I shared.

I quickly found out that IRTF is not only an organization, but a community – and the foundational pillar is that "InterReligious" word I had ignored at first. In my first week, I was thrown into a whirlwind of planning for the Interfaith Prayer Service in Support of Migrants and Refugees, hosted at Trinity Cathedral. While I spent the days leading up to it helping send out invitations and figuring out the logistics, I had no idea what to expect until the day of the service. Over *one hundred* people across faith communities showed up that morning, cultivating the strongest sense of peace and solidarity I have ever had the privilege to be a part of. Hearing and seeing the overlapping values of compassion, strength, and "welcoming of the stranger" from not only Christian but Jewish and Islamic traditions filled me with hope.

My own relationship with faith has been not unlike that of many young people of my generation raised in the Catholic church. I attended Catholic school for 12 years, but my commitment and connection to my faith has not always been strong. It felt hard to relate to old teachings in modern times, and I started to drift away from religion through the years. After I graduated from Magnificat High School in 2023, I did not think I would ever have as much integration and interaction with my Catholic roots as I had in my 12 years of Catholic education.

I was wrong. I learned throughout this summer that faith-based groups, including many Catholic churches and working groups, make up a foundation of grassroots immigration support and action in Cleveland. IRTF has existed and worked on immigration issues since long before the recent wave of immigration advocacy that has emerged with the Trump Administration's mass deportation and incarceration of migrants. As a small organization and a tight-knit community, IRTF's support is *direct*. They do not fundraise to send off money to people they will never meet; they form relationships with the community they support and offer guidance based on genuine concern and care for their wellbeing. This summer, we accompanied migrants to their immigration hearings, speaking with them in a mix of broken English and Spanish, learning their stories and offering them support and companionship. We connected with other community groups to learn how we could best inform local migrant and refugee families through Know Your Rights training. We challenged our own comfort and security by attempting to take on the fear and uncertainty faced by the migrant community.

*This* is the kind of support system that we are called to participate in. An active, direct, community-oriented system of care that does not allow us to avoid the discomfort brought by difficult social and political issues. We are called to "welcome the stranger," not from a distance but from an outstretched, welcoming hand of solidarity. This requires active participation in change to the system which creates injustice, and direct support to those who are hurt by it. At the beginning of this summer, I was a stranger to the network of care and activism upheld by faith-based organizations like IRTF. I am eternally grateful to have been welcomed by them with open arms, instilling in me a new sense of pride in my Catholic roots and ethics, and allowing me to participate in and see immigration justice in action.